

The Shaws of Coosa County

“You can’t explain it ... You have to experience it.”

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According to Raymond and Sara Shaw of Coosa County, nurturing their 640-acre TREASURE Forest has been comparable to raising a child. It takes a lot of effort. Effort that can drain you physically, emotionally and financially; but according to them the benefits are so great you’re willing to do it.

“We didn’t know it would take this much effort to manage a farm,” explains Raymond. “But we also didn’t know the benefits. I don’t know of anything we have done in our lives other than raise our family that we are prouder of or receive more benefit from. You can’t explain it so that people can understand. You have to experience it.”

Weekend Retreat Turns Into More

When Raymond retired from the computer business in the early 1980s, the couple looked to the family farm as a weekend retreat to get away from Birmingham. But after retirement the couple found they stayed there more and more and enjoyed the rural setting so

much that they decided to take up permanent residence. The couple says it was their real love for the land that persuaded them to move to the farm full time.

They began work on a 100-acre tract that had been in Raymond’s family since the area was first settled. Because of a Southern pine beetle outbreak years earlier, Raymond’s mother had cut all of the pine timber. According to Raymond there was “nothing there.” The land had not been farmed in around 75 years.

They moved to the property with the intention of cattle farming. Their first job was to develop the land into pastures. After six to eight years of raising cows they decided that it was much too expensive to develop pasture and care for cattle. The couple wanted something that was good for the land and beneficial to them as well. After careful studying and research of many farm commodities they finally decided on planting their land in trees. “I looked at the economics of forestry and it was really the only commodity I had a choice in,” laughs Raymond. “Forestry does offer some promise of economic return.”

During this time the couple’s landholdings greatly increased. In 1989 they acquired a 120-acre tract just a short distance from their farm, and in 1991 bought approximately 420 acres of land also down the road from their original 100. All of this land had once been in Raymond’s family so it meant a lot to him to finally acquire it.

Making Improvements

Between 1989 and 1995 the couple planted approximately 280,000 pine trees and put in over 10 miles of firelanes and roads on their property. On the 120 acres purchased in 1991 they have planted 55 acres of pines and established five food plots. On the 420 acres they acquired in 1991 there are 16 food plots and around 5 miles of roads and firelanes.

According to Raymond, keeping a road and firelane system has been one of the greatest challenges they have faced, especially in hilly terrain. They all have to be planted and bush-hogged during the year. Raymond laughs as he tells about how they have tried just about everything on their farm. They have had



The Shaws have over 10 miles of roads and firelanes on their property.



Sara and Raymond Shaw.



A beautiful pond graces the grounds and provides fishing for family and friends.

many successes a few failures along the way. For instance, one practice or technique may work on one place but not be suitable for another, but they have learned from and enjoyed every minute of the experience.

Although the couple's objectives are timber and wildlife, aesthetics and recreation have become very important to them over the years, especially on the 100-acre tract they now call home. "Being out here on the land in the natural surroundings you just want to make things as pretty as you can," explains Sara. "We love to see the delight on people's faces when they come to the farm the first time."

Over the years they have planted over 250 ornamental trees, 3,000 shrubs, thousands of various bulbs, installed two miles of irrigation, and established a fishing pond. Included in the 100-acre tract is 40 acres of coastal Bermuda pasture and a 50-acre tract of hardwood. When completed, over 40,000 different items will have been planted. All of this has been done for the enjoyment of their family and friends. The couple has five children, eight grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. For them, seeing their family enjoy horseback riding, riding four-wheelers, fishing and hiking makes all of the hard work worth it.

They laugh together when they say the beauty that surrounds their home was the result of them reaping the benefits of

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Sara Shaw, Alabama Forestry Commission Forester Blake Kelley, Raymond Shaw, and Joel Glover with the Department of Conservation.

their youngest son's education. Paul was attending Auburn University studying landscape architecture in 1984 when he used the farm as the basis for his fifth year thesis. The 40 acres of landscaping around their home is just the implementation of his plan.

Because of their outstanding forest management accomplishments, the Shaws were certified as TREASURE Forest #1,101 in 1995. Sara explains how the two of them got involved in the TREASURE Forest Program. In 1991 she, Raymond and their two sons, Robert and Paul, were planning to travel to Eufaula to attend their first Landowner and TREASURE Forest Conference. At the last minute Robert and Raymond had conflicts and could not attend. Paul flew in from Dallas and the two of them attended the conference. We were "hooked on it" Sara explains. "We were surprised and encouraged." Since 1991 the Shaws have not missed a conference and are not only members of the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association but their local forestry planning committee. She says their association with other landowners and seeing what they are accomplishing helps them with their plans. "It feeds on itself." Sara says that everywhere they go they set some inspiration from seeing the accomplishments of a fellow landowner. "That makes me want to come home and do something else."



Thousands of bushes and shrubs have been planted on the farm.

Education a Priority

As characteristic of all TREASURE Forest owners, the Shaws love to share their beautiful property with others. The couple feels that it is very important for landowners to participate in education programs, especially the education of children. "As forest owners if we don't get the right message out then the wrong message will be out," explains Raymond. The couple participates annually in Adopt-A-School by hosting all Coosa County fifth graders for an outdoor classroom. Assisted by the Coosa County Forestry Planning Committee, the daylong event includes stops like tree identification, soils, wildlife, forest management, and water quality. Stations are set up and the children rotate to each

segment. Afterwards, the couple cooks hot dogs for the group.

They have also hosted several adult groups including the county planning committee's TREASURE Forest field day and the local master gardeners group. The couple says they enjoy having people visit their property, especially children. In the past Sara has hosted her class reunion and their grandson from Birmingham once brought 17 of his friends to spend a few days.

Accomplishments Earn Honors

Over the past few years the Shaws have made tremendous accomplishments in managing their farm. In 2000 these accomplishments earned them the honor of Helene Mosley winner in the north-east region of the state. Raymond stresses that their success would not have been possible without the help of many others, especially the natural resource agencies that have assisted him throughout the years. "The Forestry, Conservation and Extension people have been a tremendous help," he explains. "I can't praise them enough." He adds that they "take you by the hand" and "steer you in the right direction." When he first began consulting the various natural resource agencies he was very surprised that he received the kind of service he did from a government agency. Everyone returned his phone calls, showed up when they said they were going to, and were very easy to work with. Aside from the professional advice the most remarkable thing to him was that they were so encouraging and "genuinely interested in helping you get things done."

For the Shaws, no job is ever complete. They have plans to build a larger lake and they are looking forward to the time in a few years when their land is ready for prescribed burning and thinning. As if they didn't have enough to do, they are hoping to acquire more land to tie their three pieces together. "We've got other plans and more things we want to do," Raymond adds.

In the mean time, the couple plans to enjoy every moment in the beautiful Eden they have helped create. "I feel so fortunate we'll spend the rest of our lives in these surroundings," Sara adds. "It's just a paradise to us." ❦